

From Traders With Stock For Sale, Never Is Heard A Discouraging Word

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Page 5

Winter rains are hitting the Shortgrass Country a full six to 10 months ahead of last season. In the past month, verified reports of up to 2 inches have been recorded. A few hombres claim to have received more than 3 inches, but nobody pays much attention to the higher measurements because normally anything above the general reading can be discounted as grandstand play to impress the banking set.

However, promise of a good winter hasn't wiped out memories of last year. The tragedy of the 1966-67 winter months continues to be a major topic around the coffee houses. You'd think ranchers would want to think of the future instead of recalling those awful times. Trying to keep track of what struck us two weeks ago is enough to put a carnival hand to sobbing down his shirt front. How anyone can bear to remember how long he poured out feed during the direst circumstances since the opening of King Tut's tomb is just one more of the mysteries that enshroud this land.

The most optimism to be found is among the livestock dealers in the San Angelo stockyard area. I was around the yards last week, pricing ewe lambs and mother ewes, and every dealer with anything to sell was predicting good times. Unlike their conversation of a month ago when they were trying to buy sheep, these boys were in a bullish mood as a result of the recent rains. They could foresee a spring wool market that would break all the records. And the pictures they painted of next year's lamb market would make a third-generation cowman yearn for a band of ewes.

One commission outfit along my path was going into the winter in such a firm position that the partners had put up a domino table right in the middle of their large office. The partners were gathered at the table, smoking big-caliber cigars and displaying every sign of landed wealth. The old-time mining towns never witnessed so obvious an aura of limitless prosperity.

To be a sport, I waited through several domino hands to see if my appointment to look at a string of lambs was going to be honored. The time wasn't wasted, by any means.

You know how tiresome it gets, associating with ranchers day after day. In this day and age, 98 percent of the country people are constantly on edge. If mohair trading collapses while the weekly deterioration of lamb and calf prices is in progress, the news spreads quickly and the rattle of the outlanders' coffee cups can be heard for a mile upwind.

Wool can take a downspin, or old cows can fall off a nickel, and the whole spectrum of ranchdom becomes as nervous as a young mother faced with the prospect of multiple births. Therefore it was a relief to be around these commission gentlemen. Now if a buyer had driven up to a ranch house with the announced intention of buying some sheep, the rancher wouldn't be found sitting inside playing dominos. Instead, chances are better than excellent that in his haste to greet the prospective customer he would knock the screen door off its hinges.

But these traders were far too shrewd to over-attack a prospect. And their strategy paid off.

While I was standing there listening to the click of the dominos, I built up a passion for their merchandise that ended up costing me at least four-bits a hundred on the deal.

Had they let me sweat another 30 minutes, nothing short of a nationwide failure of the banking system would have kept me from buying their lambs.